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“Urban Harlequins with Outmoded Fashions”: The Use of Record Players by Modern Hipsters

Ben Burdett

For an object, the record player occupies a highly unique place in modern culture. It is a reminder of where music used to be: how it was consumed, how it was manufactured/marketed, and how it was experienced by listeners of the past. Vinyl records and the record player function as a form of nostalgia for the 1950s and 1960s, when vinyl was the dominant medium for music. Recent statistics indicate that vinyl records have been gaining resurgence in popularity; in 2013, vinyl sales increased by 32% in the United States (International Federation of the Phonography Industry, 2014). Scholar Bernardo Alexander Attias (2011) noted that DJs or audiophiles did not drive the resurgence of vinyl records. Attias (2011) attributes the boost in vinyl sales to a unique American subculture: college-educated, middle- and upper-class urban youth, commonly referred to as “hipsters.” Today, record players and vinyl have become synonymous with hipsters in popular

culture. “Hipsters,” as described by one NPR writer, are people who “drink cheap beer, listen to music on vinyl records, and decorate their lairs with up cycled furniture” (Weeks, 2011). The connection between record players and hipsters goes beyond simple association. The record player as an object and image has come to be symbolic of the stereotypical hipster; representative of identity, education, socioeconomic status, and the search for authenticity through nostalgia and irony. The fact that the record player holds such significance for a small percentage of young people may not be important in itself, but understanding how and why the record player holds this significance will shed important light on certain, less obvious aspects of society as a whole—mainly, why objects influence and define certain individuals.

In *Eyewitnessing*, a monograph of European Art, historian Peter Burke (2001) notes that images can help



Figure 1. A record player. via flic.kr/p/fL4jtH by Bill Benzon (CC BY-SA 2.0)



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historians gain access to a “history of mentalities” (p. 9), or a sense of how and why people thought differently in the past. Although images are by nature distorted and subjective representations of reality, Burke (2001) states that,

The process of distortion is itself evidence of phenomena that many historians want to study: mentalities, ideologies, and identities. The material or literal image is good evidence of the mental or metaphorical “image” of the self or of others. (p. 30)

The image of the record player indicates that hipsters (a) have a desire for high-quality music, (b) can afford to purchase a record player and records for it, and (c) find listening to music and acquiring physical musical devices personally significant—as indicated by the private space which the record player/records occupy (the home). Indeed, these assertions are closely related to how hipsters are perceived in 2015; snobbish about music, educated, wealthy, and self-defining through (usually ironic) visual cues. One New York Times journalist described rather bluntly: “The hipster haunts every city street and university town...He tries to negotiate the age-old problem of individuality, not with concepts, but with material things” (Wampole, 2012). The description this journalist provides assumes that hipsters define themselves through material and visual objects. The record player becomes an object through which a person defines their identity. The object, to the hipster, is symbolic of many aspects of his or her life: education, wealth, and desire for authentic music (and authenticity in general). The image of a record player can characterize the hipsters’ personalities, both in the eyes of others and also themselves.

If the hipster views the records and the record players as representative of who they are, then the image of the record player can be interpreted as an advertisement for hipsters, selling hipsters an image of themselves. The record player has become a visual representation of the hipster identity and advertisers may use that image/identity to sell a product that the hipster can use to define and to display themselves as individuals. Researcher John Berger (1972) states,

All publicity works upon anxiety. The sum of everything is money; to get money is to overcome anxiety. Alternatively the anxiety on which publicity plays is the fear that having nothing you will be nothing...The power to spend money is the power to live. According to the legends of publicity, those who lack the power to spend money become literally faceless. Those who have the power become lovable. (p. 143)

The aura created by the record player’s image is selling the product; not just the object, but a lifestyle and an identity associated with the object. The image essentially tells the viewer: ‘buying this record player will allow you to assert your individuality. It will give you a physical representation of who you are at home, in private (i.e., who you *really* are). Having the ability to purchase records means exercising “freedom of choice” as an individual, and therefore the ability to have an identity. Identity construction is reinforced by the ability to purchase records publicly; one’s identity becomes attached to the purchase made in a store. In short, the image of the record player sells hipsters their own image.

An important part of the hipster image that is being marketed to individuals is nostalgia. According to the New York Times journalist Christy Wampole (2012), the hipster is characterized as “manifesting a nostalgia for times he never lived himself...this contemporary urban harlequin appropriates outmoded fashions (the mustache, the tiny shorts), mechanisms (fixed-gear bicycles, portable record players) and hobbies (home brewing, playing trombone).” The record player represents “outmoded fashions,” and grants hipsters an identity that can be marketed to others as a part of their “cool” and “unique” personalities, which stand in contrast to the status quo. Therefore, the record player, and specifically the image/aura of it, serves as publicity of one’s identity. Furthermore, the fact that the image alludes to the record player as an object of nostalgia is significant, for as John Berger (1972) states,

Publicity is, in essence, nostalgic. It has to sell the past to the future. It cannot itself supply the standards of its own claims. And so all its references to quality

are bound to be retrospective and traditional. It would lack both confidence and credibility if it used a strictly contemporary language. Publicity needs to turn to its own advantage the traditional education of the average spectator-buyer. What he has learnt at school of history, mythology, poetry can be used in the manufacturing of glamour. (p. 140)

As people are aware of the high quality and price of vinyl music, as well as its role in the history of music, the record player becomes symbolic of “authenticity” and nostalgia. Putting the record player on display as an object that defines one’s identity allows the individual to present oneself as “authentic,” and nostalgic for a better time period.

One last thing must be noted regarding the central issue surrounding the analysis presented in this paper, and the use of images as historical evidence. Historian Peter Burke (2001) explains that,

It can be extremely misleading to view art as a simple expression of a ‘spirit of the age’ or *Zeitgeist*. Cultural historians have often been tempted to treat certain images, famous works of art in particular, as representative of the period in which they were produced. Temptations should not always be resisted, but this one has the disadvantage of assuming that historical periods are homogenous enough to be represented by a single picture in this way. (p. 31)

Representing a historical time period with a single image is misleading because the image can never fully capture every dimension of the time period it relates to. The same principle can be applied to the record player (both the image of it and the object itself). Although it has been demonstrated that the record player has become a symbolic object for a certain group of people referred to as hipsters, one must be wary of drawing conclusions from this apparent con-

nection. The branding of people as hipsters is a generalization and stereotype; who exactly qualifies as a hipster is entirely subjective and difficult enough to determine. This is not to say that there is no connection to be made between urban, middle- and upper-class youth and the resurgence of vinyl; as has been shown in this paper, there is in fact a connection to be made. Rather, what is important to remember is that this object/image is not *solely* representative of people classified as hipsters. As an object, the record player functions in a variety of ways for many different people. It can function as nostalgia, a status symbol, or simply a format through which high-quality music can be experienced. Even though owning a record player may be characteristic of hipsters, this is a connection based entirely on stereotype. The identity of an individual cannot be reduced to a single object or image, no matter how tempting or apparently correct it may be.

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